

June 27, 2006

“Come Together D.C. - Get Screened for HIV”

Statement of Senator Tom Coburn, M.D.

Twenty one years ago, I delivered a baby girl who would become the first child I delivered to die from AIDS. I discovered she was infected with HIV after I diagnosed her mother with full-blown AIDS. The mother died two and a half weeks after we learned she had the disease. Her daughter struggled through seven years of treatment before she joined her mother.

Back then, much was still not known about HIV and AIDS. Few medical therapies were available to treat the disease. The epidemic was believed to be almost entirely centered in a few metropolitan areas and among very specific high risk groups. Even within the public health community, fear and lack of knowledge about this new disease left many of those living with the virus unable to access what care that did exist and fear of stigmatization kept many others from even seeking testing or treatment.

Over the past two decades, medical breakthroughs have dramatically transformed HIV infection for many into a chronic, manageable disease. Medication can now delay the onset of AIDS and turn what was once an imminent death sentence into a treatable condition.

As many as 45 percent of persons testing positive for HIV received their first positive test result less than a year before AIDS was diagnosed. With an average of 10 years between HIV infection and an AIDS diagnosis, this suggests that people are living with HIV for many years before they are aware of their infection and may be unknowingly spreading the virus to others.

Testing procedures established decades ago to ensure those being tested for the new disease were properly educated have become barriers to diagnosis and created a stigma that discourages patients from seeking and doctors from providing HIV testing.

The result is that about one in four of the over one million Americans estimated to be living with HIV are unaware of their status and are being denied life saving medical care.

Today, the District of Columbia is launching an initiative to reduce barriers to testing and treatment by making HIV screening a routine component of all medical exams.

This is particularly important since the nation's capital has the highest rate of new AIDS cases in the country. The city's annual rate of new AIDS cases is almost 12 times the U.S. average. As many as 25,000 people in the District may have HIV, more than 4 percent of all residents.

Controlling this epidemic and providing treatment to those already infected means that we must do a better job identifying those who are infected. We must remove barriers and end the stigma surrounding HIV testing. We must ensure that both those with HIV who pass through the health care system and who do not receive regular health care are extended opportunities for testing and treatment.

We must, likewise, ensure that those who are diagnosed are provided appropriate treatment and counseling.

The U.S. federal government is expected to spend nearly \$20 billion on HIV/AIDS related programs this year alone and we as a nation have committed ourselves to providing billions of dollars worth of medication and care services to those living with HIV around the globe. Clearly, there is no acceptable reason why with such a large financial investment that any American living with HIV can not access medically necessary care, especially right here in the Nation's Capital.

It is my hope that as Congress reauthorizes the Ryan White CARE Act and begins the appropriations process this year that we can target additional resources to the District and other areas across the country that have decided to prioritize early HIV diagnosis and access to treatment.

I would like to recognize Dr. Marsha Martin, who heads the District's Administration for HIV Policy and Programs, for her compassion for those affected with HIV/AIDS and her determination and dedication to ending this epidemic.

Throughout her career, Marsha has been an effective advocate and activist for the underserved. Today, under her leadership, the city of Washington becomes the leader in efforts to provide early diagnosis and access to treatment for all those living with HIV/AIDS.

Thank you, Marsha, for your courage, sacrifice and vision. I look forward to working with you to make this initiative a success and to making a real difference in the lives of those afflicted by this horrible disease.